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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that the commonly taught phonics rule "a vowel in the middle of a one-syllable word is short" is accurate only 68% of the time, given that a single-syllable word has been correctly identified. A recent research endeavor, which analyzed 138,000 words listed in the "New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language," indicated that only 39% of the words could be correctly pronounced using the rule. Results suggested that the rule be reworded so it would not apply to words with vowel digraphs such as "air." Analysis of the revised rule indicated that 68% of the words could be correctly pronounced in the cases where no errors were made in identifying one-syllable words. However, children in early first grade can reasonably be expected to make a considerable number of errors in the identification process; therefore, the rule's utility is probably much lower in actual classroom situations. Given Theodore Clymer's generally accepted standard of utility for phonics rules, which requires a large enough sample of words to which a rule applies and a 75% standard frequency of application for correct results, even the reworded rule is unsatisfactory, suggesting that the rule no longer be taught. (JD)

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A STUDY OF THE PRONUNCIATION OF
SINGLE-SYLLABLE, CLOSED-SYLLABLE WORDS

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This article reports new research concerning the accuracy and usefulness of the universally taught phonics rule, "A vowel in the middle of a one-syllable word is short." The origin of this rule is not at all clear. It has been around and taught for generations, but a thorough search of the literature reveals no research nor analysis of a group of words which produced it.

The Previous Research

Since about 1960, however, it has been included in several phonics utility research projects, all using very similar terminology and relatively small (but different) lists of words. Theodore Clymer used 2,600 words, grades one through four, taken from four basic series and the Gates Reading Vocabulary for Primary Grades. He found 447 such one-syllable words, 73% of which (or 328 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CVC rule (Clymer 1961). In a very similar research by Clymer using a similar word list, reported in Reading Teacher, January, 1963, he located 657 such one-syllable words, 62% of which (or 408 words) correctly could be pronounced using that rule (Clymer 1963).

Four other research articles pertinent to this rule were found and all of them were patterned after Clymer's design. Summaries of them follow.

Mildred Bailey used a list of 5,773 words from the grade one through six vocabularies of eight widely used basal series. She located 1,021 such one-syllable words, 71% of which (or 730 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CVC rule (Bailey 1967).

Robert Eman's words source was The Teachers Word Book of 30,000 Words, by Thorndike and Lorge, and he used a 10% random sample of the 19,440 words above grade four, for a list of 1,944 words. He found 139 such two-syllable words, 72% of which (or 101 words) correctly could be pronounced using the CVC rule (Emans 1967).

Mary Ann Dzama used a list of 2,025 words assembled from a random sample of the acquired sight vocabulary of 225 first-grade children. She located 420 such one-syllable words, and found that 72% (or 302 words) correctly could be pronounced using the rule (Dzama 1975).

Bieri used a list of 1495 words taken from Feinstein's Programmed College Vocabulary 3600, obviously college-level words. He did not indicate the total number of such one-syllable words found, but did report that 80% of them correctly could be pronounced using the CVC rule (Bieri 1977).

The above findings are summarized in tabular form in Table I, as follows.

Table I
Utility of the Phonics Rule, "A vowel in the Middle
of a One-Syllable Word is Short," as Found by
the Previous Researchers Listed.

Researcher	Total # of Such Words in Sample	# Not Conforming	# Conforming to Rule	Percent of Utility
Clymer (1961)	447	119	328	73%
Clymer (1963)	657	249	408	62%
Bailey (1967)	1021	291	730	71%
Emans (1967)	139	38	101	72%
Dzama (1975)	420	118	302	72%
Bieri (1977) ¹				80%

¹Bieri reported only percent of utility.

The New Research

The research done by the author of this article used a list of all the 138,000 words listed in the New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language. A total of 3,923 one-syllable words with "a vowel in the middle" were found, and of these, 39% (or 1,534 words) correctly could be pronounced using the rule as stated.

However, in doing the research it became apparent that a large group of the words did not have the vowel in the exact middle, such as the word split, and another large group had a vowel in the middle, but it was part of a digraph, such as in the word air. When several children who had recently learned the rule were observed applying it, some did look for the exact middle, others did not. Most of the time they considered the letter in the position represented by the i in air to be in the middle, and they attempted to apply the rule. The rule was, therefore, reworded to read, "When the only vowel in a one-syllable word is not the last letter in the word, it is short."

This new wording eliminated the words with vowel digraphs (such as air) but left included words which had one vowel somewhere between the two end letters, and such words as it, at, etc. The research was then redone, reducing the list to 1,835 words, 68% of which (or 1,257 words) correctly could be pronounced using the rule, provided that, however, no errors would be made in identifying the words which are one-syllable words. Children in early first grade (when the rule is usually taught) reasonably

could be expected to make a considerable number of errors in identifying the number of syllables in words. To the extent they would, the percent of utility would be reduced.

Clymer's standard of utility, namely, 1) a large enough number of words to which a rule applies, and 2) 75% correct results, seems to have been quite widely accepted, whatever his source for it was. The CVC rule as traditionally worded does meet the standard in frequency, but not in percent of correct results. It should be noted that the percent of correct results is by far the most important. A rule with a low percent of correct results is more dangerous when it applies to thousands of words in the language than if it applied to only a hundred or so.

The rule as reworded meets the standard of frequency of application, but still falls short of the standard of 75% for correct results. Many teachers seem satisfied with 68%, which is considerably higher than the correctness of several other widely taught phonic rules involving vowels. Yet we would all be hard pressed to make a list of even five things in our daily life with which we would be satisfied if there were 68% accuracy, or if each worked but 68% of the time.

Children deserve something much better than a rule which works only 68% of the time, but they must first be perfectly accurate in identifying one-syllable words.

The research concerning the usefulness of this rule is comprehensive enough to provide a final conclusion on it. Even in the form as revised for the final stage of this study, children should not be taught to use this rule.

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